

CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY
National Foreign Assessment Center

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MEMORANDUM

ARAB STATES' INFLUENCE ON THE
PALESTINE LIBERATION ORGANIZATION

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Key Points

--PLO leader Yasir Arafat attempts to maintain good relations with as many states as possible in order to avoid overdependence on any single state, and to obtain greater material support and political backing.

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--The need for such a broad base of support partially inhibits the PLO from actions that would conflict seriously with the policies of important patron states.

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--The PLO often is a prisoner of inter-Arab politics and is rarely able to influence major political developments in the Middle East directly.

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--Sympathy for the Palestinians' claims against Israel is nearly universal in the Arab World, however, and no Arab leader can openly abandon the Palestinian cause without risking serious censure or worse.

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This memorandum was prepared by the Middle East Division of the Office of Regional and Political Analysis. Questions and comments may be addressed to

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- Syria wields more influence over the PLO than any other Arab state, and in many instances holds veto power over PLO policies. Without the support of other Arab states, however, Damascus would be reluctant to attempt to impose unpalatable terms on the PLO in a Middle East settlement. [REDACTED]
- Saudi Arabia possesses considerable financial leverage over Fatah and the PLO but generally has avoided using the blatant pressure tactics employed by other Arab states. [REDACTED]
- Iraq and Libya are able to exercise control over some Palestinian extremist groups, but have only marginal influence with Fatah and Palestinian moderates. [REDACTED]

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Background

The establishment of the Palestine Liberation Organization was proposed by Egypt and Jordan during an Arab summit conference in Cairo in 1964 as a demonstration of militancy designed to offset a Syrian call for war with Israel. From its inception the organization was dependent upon the Arab states for arms and financial aid, and was used by them to further their various political objectives. [REDACTED]

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Following the June 1967 war the Palestinians gradually asserted their independence from Arab state control. Several factors accounted for this transformation: [REDACTED]

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--Conventional Arab military forces were humiliated during the war, leaving the Palestinian guerrillas as the only force capable of continuing the struggle against Israel. [REDACTED]

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--The war generated a large new group of Palestinian refugees from the West Bank, thus offering the guerrillas new recruits and focusing world attention on the Palestinian question. [REDACTED]

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--By February 1969 Yasir Arafat's Fatah had assumed control of the PLO and the organization gained wider popular appeal in the Arab world. [REDACTED]

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Support for the Palestinian cause, if only on the verbal level, is considered by many Arabs to be an important test of one's commitment to Arab nationalism. This phenomenon most recently was demonstrated by President Sadat's foot-dragging on a settlement with Israel that did not clearly address the issue of Palestinian aspirations to gain control of the West Bank and Gaza territories. [REDACTED]

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Arafat and other PLO leaders have successfully capitalized on the popular appeal of their cause. By playing one government off against another, Arafat has managed to maintain for himself, and to a lesser extent for the PLO, a degree of independence that is remarkable given his organization's dependence on external support and lack of a secure territorial base. The political turbulence and factionalism common to the Middle East,

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moreover, virtually ensure that Arafat will never be without allies and that the PLO will enjoy some room for maneuver.

[REDACTED]

The PLO attempts to improve its bargaining position by winning and maintaining the support of states outside the Middle East as well. PLO leaders of all stripes consider the political support of the USSR important, and consult frequently with Soviet officials. During 1978, for example, Arafat visited Moscow three times. To some extent the PLO also shapes its policies to win the approval of Western states. Arafat and his colleagues have sought a dialogue with the US based upon a professed moderation and willingness to acquiesce in the continued existence of the Israeli state.

[REDACTED]

The constraints on the PLO's independence are manifold, however. Those Arab states who help keep the Palestinian issue alive also cynically exploit it to advance their own more narrow political goals. Iraqi and Libyan support for radical groups within the PLO is designed to further their particular interests, as is Syria's controlling role over Saiqa. Support provided to Fatah by these and other states is of course meant to enhance the donor's influence as well.

[REDACTED]

The Arab states are generally able to control the overt activities of the Palestinian activist groups within their borders. Jordan is the most notable example in this regard although it required several months of sporadic but bloody fighting in 1970 and 1971 before the government brought the Palestinians to heel. Syria allows the Palestinians the use of some military training facilities and gives them other forms of material support, but has quickly curtailed such assistance when at odds with the PLO. Similar facilities provided to the Palestinians in other Arab states are equally tenuous. Lebanon remains the last relatively independent base of operations for the Palestinians. Here they have taken advantage of a weak national government to maintain a strong military presence despite attempts by various parties, including Syria, to limit their freedom of action.

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